

The chief newspapers in Wilmington were the *Morning Star*, the state's oldest daily, and the *Messenger*, both Democratic. Together with the *News and Observer*, the Raleigh daily owned by Josephus Daniels, these papers kept up a constant drumbeat on this issue. Scarcely an issue of the two Wilmington papers appeared in the summer of 1898 without notice of the latest "outrage." On July 2 "small colored boys" were held responsible for "reckless plundering." The following day three black men attempted to shoot a white man but fled before carrying through with the act. On July 31 a black man shoplifted a ham and pulled a razor on the policemen who attempted to arrest him.

The newspaper coverage was not limited to eastern North Carolina papers. The *Charlotte Observer*, generally considered more moderate on racial issues, sent their star reporter H.E.C. ("Red Buck") Bryant to Wilmington in September. He filed a report indicating that "every night, every day, almost every hour, for some months, robberies, burglaries, and various other crimes have been committed in the town." His account was widely reprinted in other papers.

The reputed crime spree appears to have peaked in August 1898 when a spate of break-ins took place in Wilmington residences. This coincided with the peak of vacation season, when many prominent white Wilmingtonians were on vacation at Wrightsville Beach or at some further remove such as the mountains. Former mayors S. H. Fishblate and W. N. Harriss were among those who returned to find their homes burglarized. On August 8 the *Messenger* reported that eight robberies had taken place over the previous weekend and that the thieves were "growing bolder every day." The newspaper further editorialized:

These robberies of residences are too frequent for a city this size, and something should be done to put a stop to their devilry. Quite a number of residences have been broken into and the community is indignant that the authorities are so powerless to catch up with the thieves or watch the houses that are left to their protection....

Two aspects of the criminal activity escaped the notice of the editorial writers but are readily apparent from a reading of the newspapers for these weeks. First, contrary to the claims of the editorialists, laws were enforced, arrests were made, and stolen property recovered. Eight boys, four white and four black, were held responsible for break-ins on July 3. The property of Mayors Fishblate and Harriss (specifically a banjo and a guitar in the case of the latter) were recovered and the thieves responsible arrested on August 19. The judicial system continued to operate. On October 19, twelve blacks convicted of crimes were sent to the penitentiary in Raleigh.

The other impression gained from a quick reading of the newspapers is that a considerable amount of the criminal activity, particularly murder and